
USAID HIGHLIGHTS

U.S.-funded Sexual Health Campaign Targets Women Working in Entertainment Venues

Phnom Penh, Cambodia
January 30, 2009



U.S. Ambassador Carol A. Rodley and Minister of Health Mum Bun Heng cut the ribbon on the SMARTgirl Launch.

The United States launched a health campaign on January 30 designed to help women working in entertainment venues protect themselves from HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases, prevent unwanted pregnancies, and increase their overall understanding of sexual and reproductive health. The SMARTgirl program will use peer outreach, social clubs and other branded advocacy efforts to continue support for the Royal Government of Cambodia's success in fighting HIV.

With leadership from the Royal Government of Cambodia and support from the United States and other donors, Cambodia has cut its HIV

prevalence rate in half to less than 1% since 1998, one of the few success stories in the global fight against the disease.

However, as Cambodia undergoes rapid social and economic change, risky sexual behaviors are also changing. Men are increasingly seeking to buy sex from women working in non-brothel entertainment establishments. Consequently, the Cambodian government's highly successful 100% Condom Use Program, which enforces condom use in brothels, is proving to be less effective. As men and women enter into relationships they perceive to be less risky, condom use plummets to less than 50%.

The SMARTgirl campaign seeks to address this shift by working in entertainment venues to increase awareness and risk perception about HIV, other sexually transmitted infections, unplanned pregnancy and illicit drug use. SMARTgirl also encourages women to use condoms in all non-marital sexual relationships, no matter how trustworthy their 'sweethearts' claims to be. Complementary campaigns to increase risk perception and condom use among men are also being implemented.

At a launch ceremony at the Cambodiana Hotel in Phnom Penh, U.S. Ambassador to Cambodia Carol A. Rodley praised the program's innovative approach. "As the HIV epidemic evolves, our challenge is to continue to achieve success without becoming a victim of it. We must resist complacency and continue to show the pragmatism and resourcefulness necessary to consolidate Cambodia's success," she said.